

*In the pastures below Black Butte Mountain:
Every morning, Gary Rose, the Lazy E's full-time buckaroo,
heads out with one of his horses and his dog, Badger, to bring in
the likes of, from left, Dewdrop, Abab, and Norman.*

true west

Saddle up with RICHARD TODD and ride the Montana range. No need to be a cowboy

PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAVID LACHAPELLE

Booting up in Malcolm Mackay's original homestead, now a cabin with a fireplace and private bath. Some of the photos date back to the 1890s, when the cabin was built—for instance, one of Malcolm Mackay himself on his horse, to the right of the guest's head.

how I wanted to answer. I wanted to say, "I ride all right, Mackay, how about you?"

Bill Mackay runs the Lazy E L Ranch, outside Roscoe, Montana, and I was his guest. He's a man in his late forties, with a face distinguished by an aquiline nose, and he wears that expression of affable skepticism, that about-to-be-astonished look, that you often see in the West. It isn't a face you want to lie to, and I folded. I told him I didn't know a damn thing about riding.

A polite man can sigh without making a sound, which Mackay did, and then he asked the second question of our meeting, which was whether we'd like a drink. Before long he had told us where we would spend the night, that the day began at six-thirty, and that we were welcome to ride with him and his crew if we wanted to.

THE LAZY E L, I SAID, WAS "OUTSIDE" Roscoe, but at eighteen thousand acres, I guess it more nearly *is* Roscoe. At least, I was unaware of much else as we drove through, except for a mysteriously busy place called the Grizzly Bar. The ranch, at an altitude of some seven

thousand feet (about as high as you want to try cattle ranching in the West), sits in the foothills of the stark, jagged Beartooth Mountains, whose snowfields were catching the evening August sun. A mile's ride on dusty private road takes you to the ranch's tidy buildings, which, like so many structures in the West, seem to have taken one look at their spectacular surroundings and decided not to compete.

We—my wife, Susan, and our three college-age daughters—were renting one of the houses, a red low-lying structure, old by western standards, and spacious, with a huge fieldstone fireplace and a library full of history and western lore. The deal was straightforward: You got to live here, and you got a horse. You could participate in the ranch's working day according to your interest and your ability to keep up. You could cook for yourself, or you could eat at the cookhouse (meals at 6:30 A.M., 12 noon, and 6:30 P.M., with a menu long on beef and chili powder). The house was clean and fully equipped, if perhaps wanting amenities. The refrigerator was empty except for five gallons of frozen calf testicles. I could see how this could be disheartening to some. There was no maid service. These days it's possible to think you aren't traveling at all until someone has given you free shampoo and put a chocolate on your pillow, and in that

frame of mind, you might well feel as if you hadn't left home. Until you looked outside.

It's a point of pride with the Mackay family that the Lazy E L is a cattle, not a dude, ranch. Before the end of my stay in Montana, I visited a dude ranch just to get the idea. There was a big lodge with a grand piano and a guy was playing "Night and Day," and a wine-tasting was scheduled for the evening, and there were veal medallions for dinner. The Lazy E L is not a dude ranch.

Of course, that doesn't mean you are not a dude.

CANDOR ABOUT ONE'S RIDING skills proved to be a sound moral posi-

Passing through Sterling Flat, a grazing area due west of the ranch, Bill Mackay, at left, with a 13-year-old guest and Gary Rose, are "riding health"—meaning, checking the cattle for bad feet, bad eyes, or influenza.



Cont'd Next TRAVELER



Finding five gallons of frozen calf testicles in the fridge could be disheartening ...

Kicking back at day's end with the Lazy E L gang. From right, Gary Rose; Sally Langston, the ranch cook; and Christopher Snell, Bill Mackay's nephew.

A HOME ON THE RANGE

Helen Mackay complains that "society is so paranoid about danger that soon nobody is going to be able to experience anything." Luckily, that has not yet overtaken the private cattle and horse ranches in Montana and Wyoming that we have tracked down. Turn to page 161 for details about sojourns working in the saddle. For weather information, see Travel Planner, page 178.

tion when the next morning, in tentative daylight, we mounted up. To the muffled entertainment of Bill Mackay's beautiful sister Helen, I very nearly executed that classic slapstick maneuver in which you end up on the other side of the horse. But I stayed aboard. I looked about from this new altitude. My wife, who does know a bit about horses, appeared distressingly serene. My poor daughter Maisie looked a bit white around the gills. But there was little I could do about that. We were off, in search of 150 steers that needed to be where they weren't.

It was an agreeable group, including Bill Mackay, Helen, their sister Julie. Bill's companion, Debbie Burghdoff, waved to us; she had a rather ominous-looking cast on her leg (there was no need to ask what had happened) and was staying home. The Mackays and Susan and I were all of an age, and

Maisie wasn't much younger than the head wrangler, a competent-seeming fellow named Gary Rose. (Our other two daughters, traveling separately, hadn't yet arrived.) Gary wore a tall black hat of a style that I'd later learn is called Las Vegas. Everybody wore hats of impressive size. We'd gotten modestly kitted out (jeans, boots) but had balked at the hat rack. A mistake. I became suddenly conscious of my canvas rain hat, which looks all right in a dinghy, I think, but doesn't cut it on a horse.

All morning I would follow Gary's black hat, his red shirt, across the undulating charcoal green grasslands. The range rolled on for miles before us, broken by parklike clumps of fir and aspen, ending in the deep green forest at the base of the Beartooth Mountains. The glaciated peaks loomed above. If we kept on our present course, we could ride for seventy miles without crossing a

road. My horse was adopting a leisurely pace, and Gary hollered, "Make that horse move. She won't do a thing you don't tell her to."

This was different from riding in the East, where, in my limited experience, riding meant a little ring or a narrow country road, one's gaze aimed at the midriff of maples. Horses there seemed somehow too big for the landscape, and always there would be a Woman with a Voice adjusting the position of your hands. In the East, riding felt a lot like dancing school.

Here in Montana, no one seemed to care at all about your form, and you rode across spaces big enough to put any creature in its place. And there was a purpose. Insofar as I'd thought about it at all, I had assumed that cowboying had become a wholly stylized activity. But by midmorning I was, at Gary's urging, riding (Continued on page 157)

COSTUME OF THE COUNTRY

For people of a certain age and/or geographical persuasion, western wear can pose a problem. Isn't this stuff kind of an affectation? In my (admittedly extreme) case, even the innocent Levi's at some point in my life began to seem fraught with unwanted meaning, more semiology than trousers. Then one day you get off the plane in a place like Billings, Montana, and everyone's wearing hat-jeans-and-boots, and you begin to think it's time to adopt the custom of the country.

Here is a social observation re jeans that may be comforting to some: Artfully faded denim matters much more to Marlboro

men and schoolgirls than to people who ride horses for a living. Cowboys actually appear to prefer newish jeans; should you and your horse part company, new jeans are more likely to go with you. The traditional brands, Levi's and Wrangler, prevail around the ranch, with Wrangler a favorite of rodeo riders because the manufacturer spends a lot of money on the sport.

You might think that a pair of hiking boots or sneakers would do for a few days in the saddle, but they won't. You need cowboy boots and may in fact not be allowed to ride without them. Not ostrich-skin needle-nosed numbers, just something with a narrow toe, smooth, preferably leather soles so as not to get hung up in the stirrup, and heels. Fairly low-heeled boots are commonly seen. A few brands are available nationally, of course, but clothing stores in the West have racks and racks of the things. It's

nice if you have time to break them in, but new boots beat no boots—you aren't going to walk far in them.

In the delicate matter of hats: Get one. In summer nobody will think it odd for you to wear one of those bright white ten-gallon straw models. The trouble is, you may find it odd, insupportably so. Probably better to spend four times as much on a Stetson with a relatively low crown and narrower—but still upturned—brim.

Thus arrayed, you discover that you are merely wearing the national costume of your country, as distinctive as Laplanders' leggings and recognizable around the world. What's so wrong about that? You may even realize that in your heart it's what you've wanted to wear all your life.

The truth is, this garb does speak to us in a language heavy with symbolism. Why this is so—why the West has such a grip on our national imagination—is not a small question. As it happens, you can find an excellent place to ponder it not far from southwestern Montana: the Buffalo Bill Historical Center, in Cody, Wyoming. Despite the alarming name, this institution is truly worth a journey. Buffalo Bill's memorabilia, relics of early ranch life, and an extensive collection of western art provide a window on the mythologizing of the West. But the ultimate attraction here is the wing devoted to the Plains Indians, a magnificent collection of tools, weapons, clothing, and shelters that reveals the beauty of the culture that the rancher—so recently—replaced. —R. T.

Bill Mackay's gear: The whip is used only to make noise, never to bit cattle.

